



Is guanxi always good for employee self-development in China? Examining non-linear and moderated relationships



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ABSTRACT

The nature of work and careers in China are constantly evolving as a result of market-oriented economic transition in the country. Increasingly, employees are required to be proactive and self-starting in skill and competency improvement for employability. Employee self-development (ESD) involves considerations embedded in a wide range of relationships including both work and non-work domains. This research draws from social exchange theory and information processing theory to investigate how guanxi, a relational phenomenon unique to traditional Chinese culture, influences ESD. Drawing from the experience of a sample ($n = 404$) of employees in China, an inverted U-shaped relationship between guanxi and ESD is found, suggesting that initial positive influences of guanxi on ESD diminish after reaching an inflexion point. We also found that these influences are stronger for gender congruent employee-supervisor dyads. The theoretical and managerial implications that too much guanxi is not necessarily good for ESD, particularly in the presence of gender congruence, are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Work and careers in China are constantly evolving against the backdrop of market-oriented reforms where the previous life-long job security in a state-planned economy is being replaced by market forces (Warner, 2013). Multiple career transitions are rapidly becoming the norm, and building a repertoire of competency has become an acceptable personal responsibility and career adaptation tool (Ren, Wood, & Zhu, 2015). In this career context, employee self-development (ESD), defined as proactive and self-starting behaviours in competency improvement (Boyce, Zaccaro, & Wisecarver, 2010; London & Smither, 1999), is increasingly salient for managing employability and career adaptability (Noe, Clarke, & Klein, 2014; Savickas et al., 2009). ESD takes place in social and cultural contexts involving relationship networks that form the foundation of human behaviour and development (Claes & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1998; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). Although prior research has acknowledged the context-dependence, including culture-dependence, of ESD (Claes & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1998; Ren et al., 2015), theorizing about the contextual embeddedness of ESD remains underspecified.

Given the pro-self nature of ESD aimed at facilitating the achievement of one's personal goals (Belschak & Den Hartog, 2010), the cultural context that regulates personal relationships becomes relevant. One such cultural context that has attracted increasing attention is China's indigenous relational concept of guanxi which describe personal, non-work relationships (Chen, Chen, & Huang, 2013). The radical changes in the nature of work, coupled with the pervasiveness of guanxi, present an interesting question about how guanxi influences ESD in China. Investigating the role of guanxi on ESD is important not just because of the theoretical relevance of cultural context, but also because work and non-work boundaries in today's workplace are becoming increasingly blurred (Trefalt, 2013).

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To date, research on guanxi has not theorised its relationship with ESD specifically. The broader literature on guanxi implicitly tends to treat it as having a positive influence on employee career prospect and proactive behaviours (e.g. Law, Wong, Wang, & Wang, 2000; Wei, Liu, Chen, & Wu, 2010; Zhang, Li, & Harris, 2015). However, a recently formalized meta-theoretical principle of 'too-much-of-a-good-thing' effect (Grant and Schwartz, 2011; Pierce & Aguinis, 2013) put forward that all seemingly monotonic positive relations reach context-specific inflexion points after which good things backfire. This suggests the theoretical possibility that the influence of guanxi may not necessarily be linear and that previous research has overlooked the nature of its influence on proactive behaviours. Indeed, a review of the empirical literature reveals a lack of consensus with respect to the influence of social exchanges underlying employee-supervisor relationships on proactive behaviours. Several studies report positive linear relationships (e.g., Chan and Mak, 2012; Law, Wang, & Hui, 2010; Hsiung & Tsai, 2009; Wang & Kim, 2013; Zhang et al., 2015). Conversely, other studies have found that having a supervisor who is perceived by employees to be supportive is not necessarily a significant predictor of proactive behaviour and can even be a negative predictor (e.g., Burnett, Chiaburu, Shapiro, & Li, 2015).

This research addresses the aforementioned theoretical and empirical discrepancies by explicitly considering the existence of non-linearity and relevant moderators between guanxi and ESD. ESD is a product of cognitive evaluation of personal, relational and contextual experiences, which in turn leads to one's evaluation of the costs and rewards of one's actions. Therefore, we draw from social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and information processing theory (Broadbent, 1958) to explain that guanxi contributes positively to ESD up to a certain point, after which its contribution diminishes. Personal relationships are influenced by liking and attraction which can be engendered by the gender composition of those involved in the relationships (Farh, Tsui, Xin, & Cheng, 1998). For this reason, we further argue that, consistent with the similarity/attraction paradigm (Donn, 1971), the influence of guanxi on ESD is contingent on the gender congruence between employees and supervisors.

The paper makes several contributions as follows. First, it enriches career research in China, which is at an embryonic stage (Russo, Guo, & Baruch, 2014). The study explicitly considers the socio-cultural context in explaining ESD. Prior research has drawn primarily from the work-focussed leader-member-exchange (LMX) perspective to explain how an employee-supervisor relationship influences voluntary learning and perceived organisational support for development (e.g., Kraimer, Seibert, Wayne, Liden, & Bravo, 2011). The fact that ESD is undertaken for the purpose of one's own competence and future employability means that the work-related LMX relationship concept does not fully capture the self-focussed nature of ESD. The LMX perspective is particularly limited in explaining ESD in the Chinese context where relationships, which take a broader meaning beyond work, are more appropriately captured by guanxi (Chen, Yu, & Son, 2014). Second, this research sharpens our understanding of ESD as a specific form of proactive behaviour. Prior research has grouped ESD and other proactive behaviours into composite measures (Grant & Parker, 2009; Parker & Collins, 2010; Tolentino, Garcia, Lu, & Plewa, 2013). This practice overlooks the subtle distinction between different types of proactive behaviours (e.g., Belschak & Den Hartog, 2010; Tornau & Frese, 2013) and risks producing confounding results (Chiaburu, Smith, Wang, & Zimmerman, 2014). Third, we subscribe to the 'too much of a good thing theory' (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013) to argue the case for an inverted U-shaped relationship between guanxi and ESD. Going beyond the conventional linear perspective is critical, not only from a theoretical standpoint, but also has practical value that can inform better management of guanxi relationships. Last, the research responds to calls for examining boundary conditions of curvilinear relationships more generally (Baer & Oldham, 2006) by explicitly considering dyadic gender congruence as a moderator of the guanxi-ESD relationship.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

2.1. Guanxi and ESD in China

Guanxi refers to personal connections bound by implicit psychological contracts to exchange reciprocity, nurture mutual commitment and aim for long-term relationships (Chen et al., 2013). Grounded in Confucian traditions, guanxi takes a broader perspective on relationships and captures cultural nuances which are different from conventional western-based relationship constructs (see Zhang, Lam, & Deng, in press). Social exchanges embedded in guanxi are bound by personal favours, personal obligations and personal trust (Farh et al., 1998). Guanxi dominates almost every facet of life in China, guiding the way people deliberately and selectively attend to, make sense of, and act upon contextual clues (Chen et al., 2013; Warner, 2013; Zhang et al., 2015). The ubiquitous existence of guanxi in the Chinese society shapes employees experience and surrounding relational contexts, in which learning and development are embedded (Hansman, 2001; Park and Kwon, 2004). ESD is a deliberate and self-initiated behaviour in which individuals assume responsibility for the whole process of learning and development (Boyce et al., 2010). As such, ESD is not isolated from the socio-cultural context in which it takes place (Hansman, 2001; Claes & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1998).

ESD is a mode of employee development that is interrelated with formal structured training and developmental work experience (Birdi, Allan, & Warr, 1997; Day & Zaccaro, 2004). It can be undertaken through participating in formal training, or through making sense of experiences, or both. ESD can be either related to the current job or unrelated. Employees can learn either during work time (such as learning from colleagues on the job) or during non-work time. ESD differs from other modes of employee development in that an employee directs the why, what, when, where and how of learning and development in a deliberate and self-starting way. With its focus on personal development, ESD differs from other proactive behaviours such as taking charge (Morrison & Phelps, 1999) and voice (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001) that primarily concern internal organisational environments. The intended target for ESD relates to self, which distinguishes it from those behaviours targeted at a fit with the organisation, such as extra-role behaviour (Van Dyne, Cummings, & McLean Parks, 1995) and job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Thus, given

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